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The Power of Action:

Turning Mental Health Awareness into Practice

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Introduction

As the mornings grow lighter and spring settles in, May not only brings warmer days but also brings an important opportunity for reflection and change. From 11–17 May 2026, it's *Mental Health Awareness Week*, and this year's theme focuses on something both simple and profound: **Action.**

For years, workplaces and communities have talked about awareness - recognising stress, anxiety, or burnout and acknowledging that "it's okay not to be okay." We've moved a long way in talking about mental health more openly. But awareness alone doesn't change experience. Real impact comes when understanding transforms into practical steps, whether that is protecting time to recover, checking in with a colleague, or creating healthier ways of working.

In this article, we will explore what mental health is, and explore how to turn that awareness into tangible strategies that work in everyday life - at home, at work, and in society.



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The Current Picture of Mental Health

Mental health challenges are not diminishing and, in many workplaces, they are increasing. Recent data highlights the scale:



Work-related ill health:

Over 50% of work-related ill health cases in the UK are linked to stress, depression, or anxiety



Time off due to mental health:

1 in 5 workers have taken time off due to poor mental health caused by stress, rising to 2 in 5 among young adults aged 18–24



Everyday prevalence:

1 in 4 people experience a mental health problem each year in England



Global impact of mental health:

Depression and anxiety contribute to 12 billion lost working days globally each year

Behind these figures are people working while overwhelmed, teams operating under sustained pressure, and organisations absorbing the impact of unmanaged stress. Mental health difficulties often build gradually. Noticing early changes in sleep, mood, focus or withdrawal, in ourselves and others, can be an important first step in taking action.

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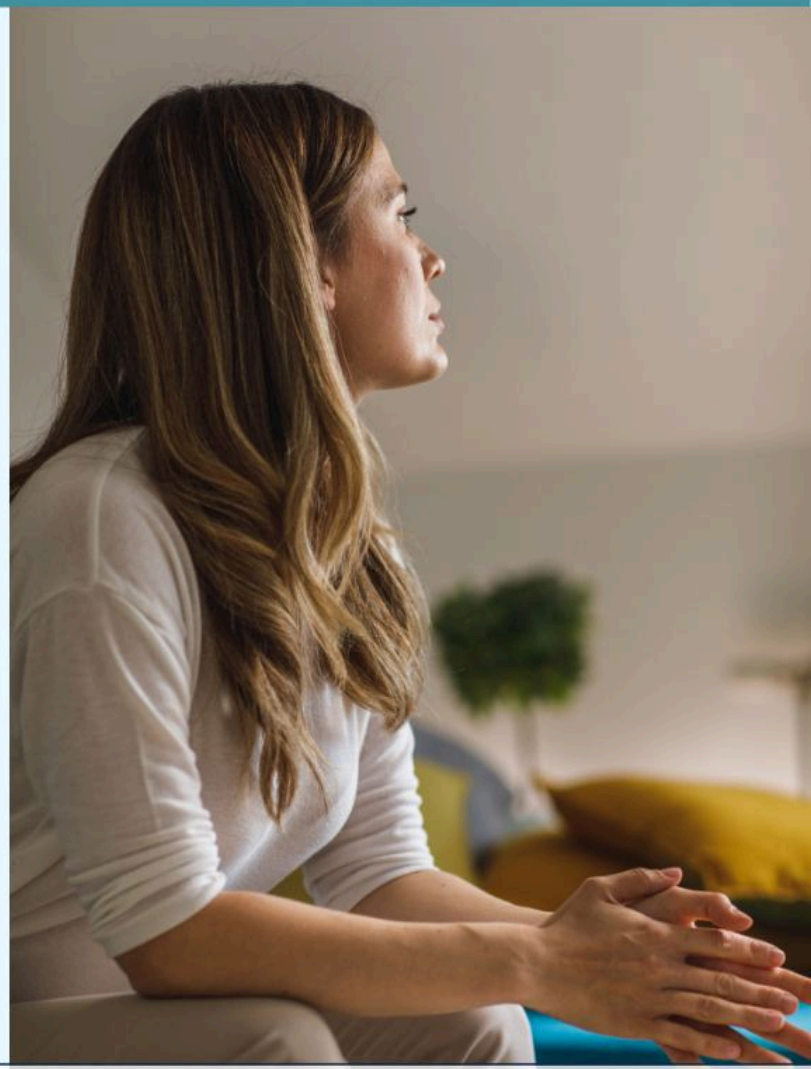
What is Mental Health?

Mental health is often misunderstood as something relevant only in times of crisis. In reality, it is a constant and fluctuating part of human experience.

> The World Health Organisation defines mental health as a state in which people can cope with the normal stresses of life, work productively and contribute to their community. In practical terms, it shapes how we think, feel and function day to day.

It is also important to understand that mental health is not fixed. It changes in response to sleep, workload, relationships, physical health, environment, and life events.

A helpful way to understand this is as a continuum. At different times, we may be thriving, coping under pressure, struggling with reduced wellbeing, or experiencing mental ill-health. Movement along this continuum is normal. This perspective removes the idea of mental health as a label and instead recognises it as a dynamic state that responds to both internal and external pressures.



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The Elephant in the Room: Stigma

Even with growing awareness, stigma remains one of the biggest barriers to action.

At work, it often shows up quietly. Someone may say they have a migraine or feel tired, but hesitate to admit they feel overwhelmed. Pressure is often carried privately, support is delayed, and struggles can remain hidden.

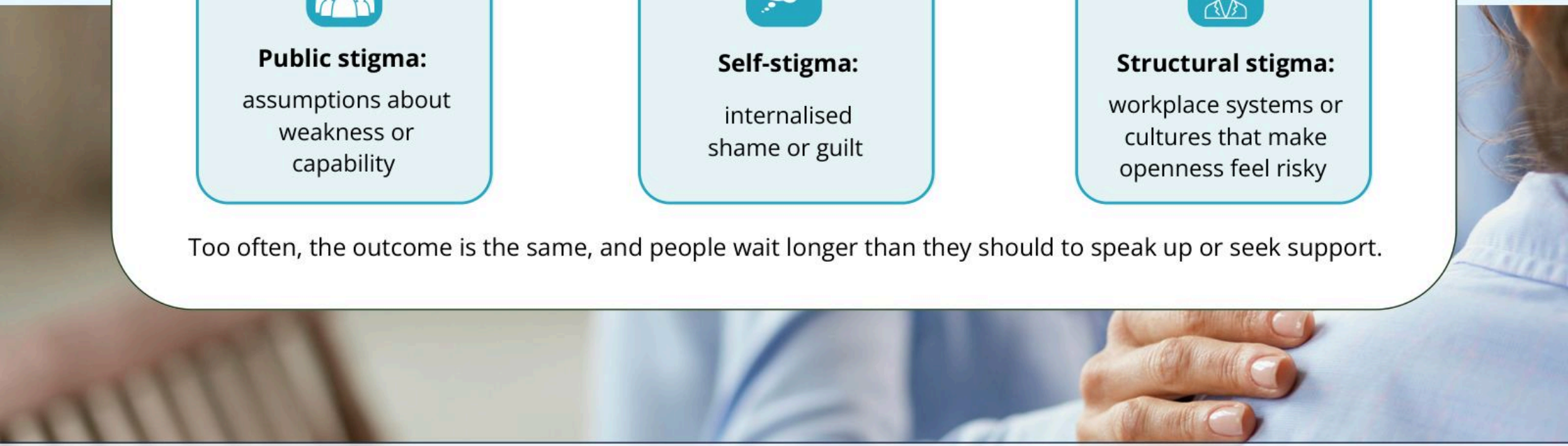
In fact, stigma can take different forms:

Public stigma:
assumptions about weakness or capability

Self-stigma:
internalised shame or guilt

Structural stigma:
workplace systems or cultures that make openness feel risky

Too often, the outcome is the same, and people wait longer than they should to speak up or seek support.



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Breaking that down often starts with small but meaningful shifts in how we talk, listen and respond. These everyday actions can help create cultures where people feel safer to speak up earlier.

Naming the experience rather than labelling the person. Try saying *"I am feeling overwhelmed"* instead of *"I cannot cope"*

Leaders being open about pressure and workload helps normalise conversations and signal psychological safety

Listening without rushing to fix the problem matters. Often people need to feel heard before they need advice

Treating mental health conversations with the same normality as physical health helps reduce stigma and encourage earlier support



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Stress, Burnout and the Importance of Recovery



Stress is not inherently negative. In short bursts, it can help us focus and perform. The challenge is not stress itself, but when pressure becomes constant and recovery disappears.

Over time, chronic stress can affect:

- Sleep and concentration
- Patience and emotional regulation
- Energy and motivation
- Physical health, mood and risk of burnout

Importantly, stress is not always just individual. It is often shaped by workload, pace, boundaries and workplace culture.

Burnout is now recognised by the World Health Organisation as an occupational phenomenon linked to chronic workplace stress. This matters because action is not only personal. It can involve changing how we work, recover and support one another.

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Action: Turning Understanding into Everyday Change

Move More for Mind and Mood

Physical activity is one of the most evidence-backed ways to support mental wellbeing. Even moderate movement can help regulate stress hormones, lift mood and support focus.

Practical actions include:

- Taking a 10–15 minute walk between meetings rather than scrolling between calls
- Pairing everyday habits with movement, such as walking for calls or taking the stairs
- Aiming for consistency over intensity
- Using movement as a reset when stress is building. For example, even a brief walk in fresh air can help lift energy and restore focus



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Eat and hydrate consistently:

Nutrition can influence mood, energy and concentration, including through the gut-brain connection, which plays a role in wellbeing and stress regulation.

Practical actions include:

- Avoiding skipping meals on busy days
- Including fibre, protein & healthy fats to support sustained energy
- Aiming for around 2–2.5 litres of water a day
- Keeping hydration visible at your desk as a prompt



Sleep well:

Sleep supports emotional regulation, focus and stress recovery, and even small improvements in sleep can strengthen resilience and help support better mental health.

Practical actions include:

- Aiming for 7–9 hours of sleep where possible
- Reducing screens and work emails at least an hour before bed, where possible
- Creating a simple wind-down routine to help build melatonin naturally



Stay connected:

Supportive relationships are one of the strongest protective factors for mental wellbeing, helping buffer stress, reduce isolation and support us through pressure.

Practical actions include:

- Making check-ins regular, not only when someone seems under pressure
- Noticing who has gone quiet, not just who appears visibly stressed
- Creating moments of connection beyond day-to-day tasks and deadlines

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Protect Boundaries

Mental strain often comes from fragmentation as much as workload. Constant interruptions, multi-tasking, shifting priorities, and the pressure to be continuously available can drain attention and energy.

Small boundaries can include:

- Protecting focus time by switching notifications off for short periods of concentrated work
- Creating breathing space between meetings rather than moving straight from one demand to the next
- Reducing the pressure to be “always on” by setting realistic expectations around response times
- Batching similar tasks together instead of constantly switching between emails, messages, and deeper work

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Action Can Also Mean Checking In



One of the most powerful actions we can take is noticing someone else and checking in. Often, when someone is struggling, the signs are there, but they are easy to overlook.

Signs someone may not be themselves can include:

- Seeming more withdrawn, quieter, or less engaged than usual
- Appearing short-tempered, frustrated, or emotionally flat
- Struggling to concentrate or seeming less confident
- Pulling back from conversations or social interaction
- Looking tired, overwhelmed, or lacking energy
- Repeatedly saying they are “fine”, but not quite themselves

It does not need to be a crisis before we reach out and speak to someone. A simple check-in, a kind question, or taking the time to listen can go a long way.

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How to Start the Conversation

1

Notice, Don't Assume

"I've noticed you seem under pressure lately. How are things?" Focus on what you have noticed rather than guessing how they feel.

2

Create Space

Start with an ordinary conversation and allow room for the discussion to develop. A casual approach can make it easier for someone to open up.

3

Ask Open Questions

Use questions that invite more than a yes or no answer. This helps the other person share in their own words and at their own pace.

4

Listen to Understand

Give your attention to what they are saying without rushing to offer solutions. Feeling heard can be more valuable than advice.

5

Validate Feelings

Acknowledge what they are sharing, even if you cannot change the situation. Showing simple understanding can help someone feel understood.

6

Ask What Helps

Rather than assuming what they need, ask what support would help. Practical help or simply being there can make a real difference.

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What If Someone Doesn't Want to Talk?

Not everyone is ready to open up straight away, and pushing for a conversation can sometimes make someone retreat further.

If someone doesn't want to open up:

- Respect that response without withdrawing your support
- Let them know the offer to talk is there whenever they feel ready
- Check in again another time, gently and without pressure
- Offer quiet support, whether that is a walk, a coffee or simply being present
- Keep showing warmth and consistency, even if conversations stay brief
- Keep the door open for future conversations

Sometimes action looks less like one big conversation and more like a steady, compassionate presence. A simple *"thinking of you"* or *"I'm here if you need me"* can go a long way.



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Five Actions to Try This Week

Notice early signs - Check in with yourself. Are you running on empty, withdrawing, or losing recovery time?

Ask one meaningful question - Move beyond *"How are you?"* and ask someone how they really are.

Protect one boundary - Create one piece of space in your week, whether that is a proper lunch break or focus time.

Build one wellbeing habit - A short walk, earlier bedtime, or phone-free pause can be enough to start.

Reach out sooner - Whether for yourself or someone else, support works best early.

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From Awareness to Action: Men's Health Matters

Mental Health Awareness Week reminds us that action often starts small, be it a conversation opened, support offered, or a check-in made sooner. It can also mean widening important conversations where they are needed most.

That is the thinking behind ***Men's Health Matters***, Thrive4Life's flagship city-wide health campaign aligned with *International Men's Health Week* this June. Men are often left out of health and wellbeing conversations and may be less likely to seek support early, which is exactly why this campaign matters.

Launching with an exclusive in-person interview with England's most-capped men's rugby player, Ben Youngs on 11 June, and followed by a specialist-led webinar series, the campaign explores themes of resilience, performance under pressure, and practical action on key aspects of men's physical and mental health.

While shining a spotlight on men's health, this campaign is also relevant to everyone. Whether for your own wellbeing or the men in your life, from partners and fathers to brothers, friends and colleagues, **these are conversations that affect us all.**



Ben Youngs, England's most-capped men's rugby player

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Understanding Mental Health: The Unseen Assassin

As part of the *Men's Health Matters* webinar series, we invite you to join '**Understanding Mental Health: The Unseen Assassin'**, a live streamed webinar with health and wellbeing specialist, Ross Abbott, who will explore men's mental health, unspoken pressures and why earlier conversations matter.

ONLINE STREAMED WEBINAR

14 JUL

1:00 - 1:35 PM

Remote, Teams Webinar

Many people find it difficult to talk about pressure, stress or emotional strain, yet these challenges touch every life. In this honest and practical session, Ross will explore how to recognise when someone may be struggling, approach difficult conversations with confidence, and use simple, science-backed strategies to support better mental wellbeing in everyday, high-pressure lives.

Grounded, inclusive and relevant to all, this session will offer practical tools for supporting yourself, colleagues, friends and family, while helping to open healthier conversations around mental health.



About the Speaker

Ross Abbott is one of Thrive4Life's lead facilitators in corporate mental health and wellbeing, with extensive experience supporting organisations across the Lloyd's market and wider City. He is known for his practical, engaging and candid approach to mental health training and wellbeing culture.

Click here to sign up and join the conversation.

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Dementia Action Week 2026:

Understanding, Reducing Risk and Taking Action

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Introduction

From 18–24 May, *Dementia Action Week* brings people together across the UK to raise awareness of dementia, challenge stigma, and encourage earlier diagnosis. Run by the Alzheimer's Society, this campaign shines a light on the stories behind the Forget Me Not symbol and encourages individuals, communities, and organisations to take meaningful action on dementia. It also highlights the scale of the issue, with dementia remaining the UK's leading cause of death while also continuing to be a growing public health challenge affecting millions of lives, both directly and indirectly.

For many working-age adults, dementia is something they encounter not just later in life, but here and now. It may show up in conversations with family, in small changes noticed in someone close, or in the experience of supporting a loved one through a diagnosis. In the workplace, it can also be part of colleagues' lives in ways that aren't always visible. In this article, we take a closer look at what dementia is, why early diagnosis matters, and what the research says about reducing risk. Alongside that, we'll share some practical ways to support your own wellbeing, and to better understand what those around you might be going through.

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What is Dementia?

Dementia is an umbrella term used to describe a group of symptoms that affect how the brain works. These can include memory loss, confusion, difficulties with communication, and changes in behaviour that begin to interfere with everyday life.

It is not a single disease, but a collection of symptoms caused by different conditions that affect the brain. These symptoms often develop gradually. In the early stages, they may be mild or easy to overlook, but over time they tend to become more noticeable. As dementia progresses, people may find tasks that once felt simple becoming more challenging, and they may need more support with things like communication, decision-making, and daily routines.

This happens because nerve cells in the brain become damaged, disrupting the way messages are sent and processed. As more cells are affected, the brain becomes less able to function as it once did.

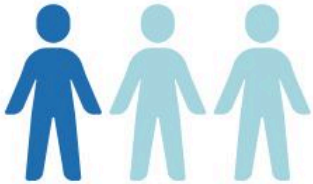
There are several types of dementia, with each disease known to affect the brain differently. The most common is Alzheimer's disease, followed by vascular dementia, while other forms, such as Lewy body and frontotemporal dementia, can lead to different patterns of symptoms.



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Why It Matters

In the UK alone, dementia is the leading cause of death, accounting for more deaths than heart disease or cancer. Despite this, awareness gaps continue to remain. For example:

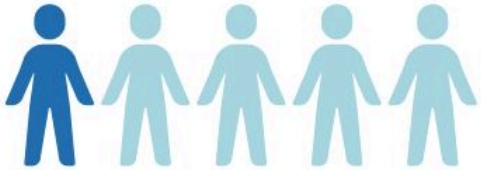


Around 1 in 3 people living with dementia in the UK do not have a diagnosis.



3.5 - 4.1 YEARS

On average, there is a delay of around 3.5 years between the first symptoms of dementia and a diagnosis, rising to 4.1 years in early-onset cases.



1 in 5 people affected by dementia have not received any support from health care, social care, or financial assistance services.

Early diagnosis does not cure dementia, but it can significantly improve quality of life, help people plan for the future, and connect them with the right care and support networks.

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Recognising the Early Signs

Dementia symptoms can vary depending on the type and stage, but early signs often include:

- Persistent memory loss, especially forgetting recent events, conversations or where items were placed
- Difficulty concentrating or following conversations
- Struggling with familiar tasks or routines
- Changes in mood, personality, or confidence
- Problems finding the right words

It is important to note that occasional forgetfulness is normal, particularly during busy or stressful periods. The difference lies in frequency, progression, and impact on daily life. If concerns arise, speaking to a GP is the first step. Assessment may include memory tests, physical health checks, and referrals to specialists.



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The Four Most Common Types of Dementia

Dementia can take different forms, affecting the brain in distinct ways and leading to a range of symptoms. The four most common types are:



Alzheimer's disease:

Accounts for around 60–70% of cases globally. It is associated with abnormal protein build-up in the brain. Early symptoms often centre on memory loss and confusion.



Vascular dementia:

Linked to reduced blood flow to the brain, often following strokes or due to conditions such as high blood pressure. Symptoms may include slower thinking, difficulty concentrating, and mood changes.



Lewy body dementia:

Caused by abnormal protein deposits called Lewy bodies. It can involve visual hallucinations, sleep disturbances, and movement difficulties similar to Parkinson's.



Frontotemporal dementia (FTD):

More likely to affect people under 65. It often presents with personality changes, reduced social awareness, or language difficulties rather than memory loss in the early stages.

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Why Risk Starts Earlier Than You Think



It's easy to think of dementia as something that only affects people later in life. While age remains the strongest risk factor, dementia is not simply a normal part of ageing. In fact, research shows that up to 40–45% of cases are linked to factors we can influence, many of which start to build up much earlier, often without us realising.

8 Key Modifiable Risk Factors

- Physical inactivity
- Poor diet
- Smoking
- Excessive alcohol intake
- Social isolation
- Untreated hearing loss
- Poor sleep
- Cardiovascular conditions

For working-age adults, this matters because many of these risk factors start to build up gradually over the years, sometimes decades, before any symptoms show up. The encouraging news is that small changes made now can help support brain health in the years ahead.

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Reducing Your Risk: What the Science Says

There is no guaranteed way to prevent dementia, but strong evidence shows that lifestyle choices can support brain health and lower risk.

1. Move Your Body Regularly

Staying active is one of the most effective ways to look after your brain. Regular movement supports blood flow to the brain and helps keep thinking and memory sharp over time.

Research suggests that people who exercise regularly may be up to 20% less likely to develop dementia. What matters most is consistency - even going from doing very little to some activity can make a real difference.

Aim for:

- Around 150 minutes of moderate activity each week
- Strength-based exercise a couple of times a week

This doesn't have to mean the gym. Brisk walking, gardening, or even keeping active around the house all count. The key is building movement into your routine and keeping it going over time.



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2. Eat for Brain Health

Diet also plays a key role in reducing inflammation and supporting brain function. The Mediterranean-style diet, which is rich in vegetables, whole grains, healthy fats, and lean proteins, is consistently linked with better cognitive outcomes.

Focus on:

- **Leafy greens, berries, nuts, and olive oil** – rich in antioxidants and healthy fats that help protect brain cells
- **Oily fish such as salmon or mackerel** – high in omega-3 fatty acids, which support brain structure and may help maintain memory and thinking skills
- **Limiting ultra-processed foods and added sugars** – these can contribute to inflammation and increase the risk of long-term health conditions

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3. Prioritise Sleep

Sleep plays a key role in brain health, helping to clear waste products, including proteins linked to Alzheimer's. Chronic sleep deprivation has been associated with increased dementia risk.

Aim for:

- 7 to 9 hours of quality sleep per night
- Consistent sleep and wake times, even on weekends

4. Keep Your Brain Engaged

Lifelong learning helps to build cognitive reserve, which helps the brain cope better with age-related changes.

Try:

- Learning something new, like a skill or even a language
- Reading, doing puzzles, or playing strategy-based games
- Switching up routines to challenge your thinking



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5. Stay Socially Connected

Social interaction keeps the brain active and helps reduce stress. On the other hand, social isolation has been linked to a higher risk of dementia in later life.

Some simple actions include:

- Making time for regular catch-ups
- Joining a club or community group
- Combining socialising with activity, such as walking meetings

6. Manage Your Physical Health

Conditions such as high blood pressure, diabetes, and high cholesterol can damage blood vessels in the brain.

Key actions include:

- Keeping up with regular health checks and screenings
- Taking any prescribed medication as advised
- Supporting your overall health through diet, movement, and other lifestyle choices

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Supporting Others at Work and at Home

Dementia affects more than just the individual - it also has a real impact on families, carers, and colleagues. Many people are trying to balance caring responsibilities alongside work, with 1 in 7 workers in the UK living as unpaid carers.

What can help:

- Open and honest conversations that reduce stigma
- Flexible working arrangements where possible
- Signposting to support services such as Alzheimer's Society
- Making use of employee assistance programmes
- Supportive line management and understanding from colleagues

Creating a more supportive and flexible workplace makes a real difference - not just for those directly affected, but for anyone managing responsibilities both in and outside of work.



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Top Tips You Can Start This Month

1

Stay on top of your health

Book a health check if you haven't had one recently, as early action can make a real difference

2

Add more variety

Add one extra portion of vegetables to your meals to support overall and brain health

3

Gentle movement

Schedule regular movement breaks during your working day, even if it's just a short walk

4

Protect your sleep

Prioritise sleep by aiming for 7–9 hours a night and keeping a consistent wind-down routine in the evening

5

Stay connected

Reach out to someone you haven't spoken to in a while; staying connected matters more than we often realise

6

Challenge your mind

Try one new mentally stimulating activity this month, such as a puzzle, course, or new skill

! The most important thing to remember is that these don't need to be big changes. Even small, realistic steps, done consistently, can build up over time to support brain health.

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Key Takeaways

- Dementia is a group of symptoms, not a single disease, and it can affect people in different ways
- Early diagnosis doesn't stop the condition, but it can improve quality of life and access to the right support
- Risk factors often begin in midlife, making awareness and prevention relevant long before later life
- Everyday lifestyle choices, from movement to sleep to social connection, play a meaningful role in brain health
- Open, supportive conversations help reduce stigma and make it easier for people to seek help and feel understood

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